GUIDE TO THE FQ5 BEMBA FILE

[The Bemba are the largest tribal unit in the Northern Province of Zambia, where they occupy the high plateau land between 9° - 12° south latitude and 29° - 32° east longitude, covering the whole district of Kasama and much of Mpika, Chinsali, Luwingu, and Mporokoso districts. Their population was estimated as around 140,000 in the middle 1930's, but there are figures indicating they may have doubled in size by the middle of the 1960's (cf. 4: Whiteley, p. 7; I. Kaplan et al. Area handbook for Zambia, 1969: 59, 76).

Some 17 or 18 tribes in this general area of Zambia comprise the Bemba-speaking peoples, and they form with the Bemba a closely related culture cluster. All of these peoples have a matrilineal-matrilocal emphasis, and are predominantly agricultural. They practice shifting cultivation, with finger millet (Eleusinium coracanium) being the staple crop in the eastern part of the area, including the Bemba, and manioc among the western tribes. There is a general absence of cattle since this area is within the tsetse belt, but the Bemba do have a few sheep and goats.

The Bemba-speaking tribes, together with several other tribal clusters, are generally considered to comprise a broader cultural-linguistic category known as the Central Bantu.

The Bemba recognize the following distinctive marks of tribal membership: a common name, Babemba; a common language, Cibemba, which in their eyes forms a distinct dialect; the tribal scarification, a vertical cut on each temple almost one inch long behind the eyes; common historical traditions; and allegiance to a common paramount chief, the Citimukulu, whose rule of the Bemba territory is unquestioned (7: Richards, pp. 86-87).

Descent, sib affiliation, and succession to office follow the matrilineal line, and marital residence is matrilocal. An individual belongs to a matrilineal lineage which determines his succession to different offices and his status in the community. He also belongs to an exogamous, matrilineal sib (mukoa) which is important for certain hereditary offices. There are about 30 sibs among the Bemba, and they are ranked according to status based on their relations with the royal crocodile sib. Inheritance is relatively unimportant since there are few forms of inheritable wealth.

Despite this matrilineal orientation, the Bemba kinship system in some ways is bilateral in nature. The kinship group to which a person constantly refers in everyday affairs is the lupwa, a bilateral group of near relatives on both sides of his family (i.e. a kindred) who join in religious ceremonies, matrimonial transactions, mortuary ritual, and inheritance. Richards claims that this group is more important to the Bemba sociologically than his matrilineal sib. In addition, a patrilineal emphasis has been increasing in recent years, including a broadening of the father's authority within the family (cf. 2: Richards, p. 17; 7: Richards, p. 87; and A.I. Richards, "The Bemba of North-eastern Rhodesia," in Seven tribes of Central Africa, ed. by E. Colson and M. Gluckman, 1968: 173-178).

Superimposed upon this kinship base is a highly centralized, hierarchical, and authoritarian political system consisting of three main levels of organization: the state, the district, and the village. As previously noted, the state is ruled by a Paramount Chief, called the Citimukulu, whose office is hereditary within a royal sib. His authority is nearly absolute, and he is believed to have supernatural powers. The Citimukulu is assisted by a tribal council consisting of 30 to 40 hereditary officials (the bakabilo), many of royal descent, and each responsible for some special ritual duty kept secret from the ordinary members of the tribe (cf. 7: Richards, pp. 87, 92; 3: Richards, p. 36; 2: Richards, pp. 87, 92; and Richards 1968: 169).

The Bemba state is divided into political districts (icalo), usually five or more in number. Each icalo is a geographical unit with a more or less fixed boundary and name, and it is also a ritual unit. A hereditary, territorial chief (mfumu) rules over each icalo. These chieftainships are arranged in order of precedence, according to their nearness to the center of the country and the antiquity of their office. To the most important of these chiefdoms the Citimukulu appoints his nearest relatives. In 1933 Richards found three major districts: the Citimukulu's personal district (called Lubemba - the center of the country), comprised of 160 villages; Mwamba's district (Ituna), with 69 villages, and Nkula's district (Icinga), with 76 villages. Each territorial chief also has his own councillors.

It is important to note that the worship of the spirits (mipashi) of dead chiefs - both Paramount and territorial chiefs - is the essential element of Bemba religion.

Each territorial chief had under him a number of sub-chiefs who might tule over very small tracts of country, or rather, over a few villages.

A district or territorial chief was also chief of his own village (musumba) and there was a significant difference in size between a chief's village and a village with a commoner as headman. The average Bemba village is rather small in size, with 30 to 50 huts. Richards mentions one village with a popu ation of 60, and another with a population of 160. In contrast, chiefs' villages were very much larger in size. In the old days such a village may have had thousands of inhabitants; in 1934, the villages of important chiefs observed by Richards had 400 to 600 huts. They were divided into quarters ruled over by loyal supporters of the chief. The nucleus of a commoner Bemba village consists of the headman's matrilocal extended family. In older villages, such as Kasaka, there may be 3 or 4 related matrilocal family groups. The heads of these family groups are the most influential members of the community; they are known as the 'great ones' of the village (bakalamba) (cf. 2: Richards, pp. 11, 110, 111, 113, 340, 385; and 4: Whiteley, p. 25).

It can be seen from the above that rank is marked feature of Bemba society. It is based ultimately on kinship, real or fictitious, with the Paramount Chief, and derivatively, with the territorial chiefs.

Ten sources, nine in English and one translation from the French, have been processed for this file. (One source, no. 5, was removed for the microfiche version of the file because it did not deal with the Bemba, but rather with a related tribe.) The major authority on the Bemba is Audrey Richards, a British social anthropologist. Five of the sources are by Richards, the basic source being 2: Richards. Based on field work for a period of two and a half years in 1930-1934, this is primarily a detailed functional analysis of Bemba subsistence activities and diet as related to the kinship system, political organization, ceremonial life, and values. 3: Richards is a complete description and interpretation of the chisungu or girls' initiation ceremony, which is associated with marriage rites. 8: Richards deals with the origin and functions of ritual sib relationships among the Bemba and the closely allied Bisa tribe, while 9: Richards is an excellent analytical study of the Bamucapi, or witch-finders movement, among the Bemba tribes. 7: Richards is a good, general description of the political system, which is neatly complemented by 6: Brelsford's thorough study of the succession of Bemba chiefs. Two articles by missionaries complete

the file thus far. 1: Labrèque complements 3: Richards with his brief description of betrothal, chisungu, and marriage ceremonies, and 10: Barnes is a very short commentary on the Bemba belief in the soul and the relation of the fate of the soul after death to the naming system.

In general, diet, economics, socio-political organization, religion, and rites of passage are well-covered, while the file is poor in data relating to material culture, language, psychology, and human biology (aside from nutrition). Only specific discussion of acculturation have been placed in category 177. For many of the results of acculturation, the specific functional categories should be seen, particularly 883 and 184. Information on the paramount chief is filed under 643, that on the territorial chiefs under 622, and that on village headmen under 624. For description of the Bamucapi in its magical context, see 791; for interpretation of it as a social movement, see 668.]

Processed in 1958, 1963

Revised File Guide prepared in 1971
by Robert O. Lagacé